

Assignment 4 final version : A Picture is worth a thousand words



Professor Paul Smith, Director, Oxford University Museum of Natural History
© Joanna Vestey 2015

This photograph is from *Custodians* a series made by Joanna Vestey 2012-15 (1)(2). In her Artist's Statement Vestey quotes author Jan Morris writing about Oxford as forming 'a national paradigm', and states that she wanted to explore this structure further and, in particular, what could be revealed by examining the relationship between the Oxford institutions making up that structure and the individuals that occupied them.' The series was intended to be 'A celebration of the spaces and particularly the role of the Custodians' with two criteria – the spaces photographed should be in Oxford and each institution should select an individual who would be seen within them as a 'Custodian'. (Vestey, 2015:89)

The series was shot with an old Hasselblad with digital back – modeling the layers of old and modern in the buildings and people. The dinosaur in the photograph above struck me as a punctum within the series as I scanned Vestey's website images. Perhaps an obvious one in terms of connotations regarding old Cultural institutions and slowness to change. However, as I explored it further, other aspects rose to the surface for me.

In keeping with the series as a whole, the soft, muted colour tones and use of light evoke a sense of calm, stillness and contemplation. I was reminded of the works of Thomas Struth (3), Candida Höfer (4) and Andy Freeberg (5) considering placement of people in the space, their relative smallness in relation

to the frame, or absence of them. In an interview with BJP Vestey herself refers to Hofer's monograph *Architecture of Absence* and the metaphysical aspects of empty buildings where you are dancing with ghosts. (6).

The use of receding perspective, lines, diagonals and triangles reminded me of classical paintings and earlier photography, but this classical composition is fragmented by the dinosaur whose spiky curves and jutting jaw act as a punctuation mark to connote a different narrative. The point of view appears chosen to emphasize the arrangement of objects within the space, in juxtaposition with the figure of the sole human appearing very small in the frame, and yet a punctum drawing one's eye as if, despite seeming less important in the overall scheme of things, he has an important role to play at this moment.

The dinosaur skeleton takes up a large portion of the foreground. With hind legs resting on a plinth, but forelegs free it looks poised to descend; skull and open jaws appearing to point at the Director, standing against a wall of large vitrines at the right hand side. A smaller prehistoric creature stands opposite, a sculptured portrait bust on a column at its back. There are further, ghostly shrouded figures in the background and to the Director's right. He gazes upwards, seemingly at the brick wall and columns opposite, apparently unaware of these creatures that appear to be surrounding him and ready to pounce. As my eyes travel around the frame I notice tables and display cabinets pushed together on the tiled floor. The Director is standing on a plywood path that travels alongside wooden scaffolding that changes to iron supporting a plastic shrouded scaffold as it meets the roof.

I have not visited the Museum itself and the Gothic arches soaring gracefully to meet a glass tiled roof connote two possibilities to me – the museum is housed within a deconsecrated church or a defunct railway station – something similar to St Pancras, London.(7) Both could fit – the worship of the past and a terminus point.(8) Indeed I wondered initially whether this was a store room where 'unused' specimens or artefacts languish until needed. The chosen, formal elements of the photograph; the wide-angled foreground and diminishing perspective add to this sense of clutter and disorder.

I doubt that Vestey moved the large objects around and assume she chose that vantage point and, taking the light direction into account, asked the Director to pose in that particular spot with his back against the cabinets. The foreground dinosaur and shrouded background figures form a triangle with the Director at its apex - the only human being in the scene, backed-up by the wooden scaffolding looks thin and somewhat spindly. It certainly does not look sufficient to support the structure of the roof.

Could this be a visual metaphor for the relationship between the Museum and the Director? He stands erect, lonely in his role, gazing steadfastly at the task ahead of him. The revered dead scientists and remains of centuries of creatures that have roamed the earth are threatening to overwhelm this man with their expectation and the need to maintain and repair an old building. A task requiring considerable financial support. Subsequent research informs me that, in line

with the University Museum Conservation Plan, 2012, (9) the Museum was closed for 14 months during a £2 million project to remove and reseal the glass roof tiles and reopened in February 2014. (10)

The Museum has a distinguished past, its founding stone being laid on 20 June 1855 and moving into its new building in 1861. Men of science have conducted significant debates there over time and statues of some are displayed around the Museum court. Professor Paul Smith became Director in 2012 and he has worked in university museums for most of his career.(11) I imagine he comes from a long line of Directors whose stays have been transient compared with the life of this Institution. It makes sense that he appears small in the frame of this particular photograph. I have been unable to find the date on which the photograph was taken but, if am correct in assuming that this occurred during the Museum's closure for repair, it provides an excellent example of the temporality of the photography – a record of a particular space and time that no longer exists.

Thinking of 'a picture being worth a thousand words' reminds me that, whilst I have been looking at a photograph and not the reality itself, this flat image has drawn me into investigating a multitude of layers and meanings, just as the Museum layers different periods of time.

(1014 words)

- (1) Vestey, J *Professor Paul Smith Director, Oxford University Museum of Natural History* At: <http://www.joannavestey.com/galleries/custodians> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)
- (2) Photograph downloaded with written permission from J. Vestey in private email dated 2 November 2011.
- (3) Thomas Struth created a series of *Museum Photographs* taken over a number of years in major European Cities. These photographs are large-scale, in colour, and show people in contemplation of historic paintings in Museums. He was interested in 'pictures of people with pictures in them'. There are pictures of people, alone, in groups, standing or seated and what holds them together as a series is the fact that they are all looking at pictures. See http://thomasstruth32.com/bigsize/photographs/museum_photographs_1/index.html (accessed 3 December 2015).
- (4) Candida Höfer creates beautifully composed photographs of public and institutional spaces that are usually empty of a human presence. See <http://aperture.org/shop/architecture-of-absence> (accessed 3 December 2015)

- (5) Andy Freeberg's Series *Guardians of Russian Art Museums* also takes us into Museums. His subjects are the women who sit in the galleries and keep watch over the collections. His photographs have more vivid colours and variety of tones, with his subjects being closer to the camera. See <http://andyfreeberg.com/guardians.html> (Accessed 3 December 2015)
- (6) In an interview with Brennavan Sritharan of The British Journal of Photography (20 August 2015) Vestey refers to Hofer's series, 'You don't need someone to be in a space to know what it's used foreven if you took out all the furniture, there's still something about the atmosphere that holds the story'. This was in reference to the concept of 'dancing with ghosts'. <http://www.bjp-online.com/2015/08/joanna-vestey-custodians/> (Accessed on 3 December 2015).
- (7) Building began on St. Pancras Station in 1867 and this Gothic building was often called The Cathedral of Railway Stations. See <http://stpancras.com/history> (Accessed on 4 December 2015).
- (8) In fact this was a new building built in neo-Gothic style. The Oxford University online archives informed me that four acres of land was purchased from Merton College in December 1853, with a further four acres added in 1854. the design for the Museum was chosen through an open competition. Following an open competition two designs were selected from 32 entries and the Convocation voted for a neo-Gothic design by Deane and Woodward. The University made a grant of £30,00 to construction cost for the shell of the building and this money was " part of the £60,000 accumulated profit of the Oxford University Press that had been mostly earned through printing bibles." <http://www.oua.ox.ac.uk/holdings/MU%20Introduction.pdf> (Accessed on 17 May 2016)
- (9) http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/estatesdirectorates/documents/conservation/University_Museum.pdf (Accessed on 3 December 2015)
- (10) On-line BBC News 16 February 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-26055962> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)
- (11) Members of the National Museum Directors' Council found at <http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/members/oxmuseum/> (Accessed on 4 December 2015)

Sources

- Vestey, J, (2015) *Custodians*, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum Publications <http://www.joannavestey.com/galleries/custodians> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)
- http://thomasstruth32.com/bigsize/photographs/museum_photographs_1/index.html (Accessed on 4 December 2015)
- <http://aperture.org/shop/architecture-of-absence> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)
- <http://andyfreeberg.com/guardians.html> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)

<http://www.bjp-online.com/2015/08/joanna-vestey-custodians/> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)

http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/estate/sdirectorate/documents/conservation/University_Museum.pdf (Accessed on 3 December 2015)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-26055962> (Accessed on 3 December 2015)

<http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/members/oxmuseum/> (Accessed on 4 December 2015)

<http://www.oua.ox.ac.uk/holdings/MU%20Introduction.pdf> (Accessed on 17 May 2016)